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Little known facts about THANKSGIVING

and Lincoln's Proclamation



"Proclaiming Thanksgiving" by Dean Cornwell. Lincoln is shown in his office at the White House having just signed, on October 3, 1863, the first annual national Thanksgiving Proclamation. The reproduction is from an original oil painting made in 1938 for The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company in commemorating the 75th anniversary of the historic event.

THERE seems to have been little recognition of the part which Abraham Lincoln played in nationalizing Thanksgiving Day, yet in the year 1863 he captured the New England spirit of “fruitful fields and healthful skies” and incorporated it in a proclamation which designated the first annual national Thanksgiving Day. The national observance of Thanksgiving during this past three quarters of a century has brought good cheer into our homes, quickened our patriotic impulses, and given the nation an unusual opportunity to reaffirm its loyalty to the “beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe.”

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Colonial Thanksgiving Days

Governor William Bradford of the Massachusetts Colony was the founder of the Thanksgiving festival. As early as 1621 he called together the early settlers at Plymouth for the purpose of offering thanks to God for the preservation of their lives, food to sustain them, and clothing for their bodies. A man of strong religious convictions, Governor Bradford continued to call, periodically, seasons of thanksgiving. One of his earliest written manuscripts was entitled, "God's Merciful Dealings with us in the Wilderness." Abraham Lincoln's first American ancestor, Samuel Lincoln, had come to this very wilderness in 1637 and had settled not far from Plymouth. As a man of religious inclinations he undoubtedly participated in these early Thanksgiving festivals.

Occasional Thanksgiving Celebrations

During the Revolutionary War Congress recommended days of fasting and prayer at intervals throughout the long struggle. At its conclusion President Washington issued a proclamation naming Thursday, November 26, as a day for the citizens of the new nation to thank God for a constitutional form of government and the blessings which accompanied it.

It was not until 1815 that the festival was again revived on a national scale when President Madison urged the people to offer thanks on a day set apart by proclamation. It came at the close of the war with England and was a season of prayer and praise for national guidance and peace. For nearly half a century there were no more proclamations forthcoming, although governors of many states, at intervals, set apart certain days for the annual observance of the feast.

A Thanksgiving Advocate

The persistent effort of Sarah Josepha Hale, a New England woman, contributed much to the building of a favorable public sentiment which eventually found expression in a national Thanksgiving Day observance. For twenty years Mrs. Hale labored diligently to emphasize the significance of a national fall festival. In a timely editorial prepared in 1852 she said: "Thanksgiving Day is the national pledge of Christian faith in God acknowledging him as the dispenser of blessings . . . The observance of the day has been gradually extending, and for a few years past efforts have been made to have a fixed day which will be universally observed throughout the country . . . The last Thursday in November was selected as the day, on a whole, most appropriate." Ten years later, in 1862, she was still pleading for the national feast day which, the preceding year, had been cele-

brated in twenty-four states and three territories. Although she had approached former Presidents with respect to setting aside a national holiday for praise and prayer, it was not until she appealed to Mr. Lincoln in 1863 that she found a sympathetic hearing.

The Preliminary Proclamation of Thanksgiving

Lincoln issued his first Presidential proclamation for a day of “public prayer, humiliation, and fasting” to be observed in September 1861. The following year a Sunday in April was set apart invoking divine guidance to “hasten the establishment of fraternal relations among all the countries of the world.” It was in 1863, however, that two national fast days were proclaimed which paved the way for the establishment of the Thanksgiving festival as it is now observed.

A special day of prayer was proclaimed for Thursday, April 30, looking to “the pardon of our national sins and the restoration of our now divided and suffering country to its former and happy condition of unity and peace.” Another day, Thursday, August 6, was set apart in which the people were requested to offer thanks for the Gettysburg victory and to call upon God “to subdue the anger which has produced and so long sustained a needless and cruel rebellion.”

It was during this Thanksgiving season for Gettysburg and its victory that Mrs. Hale called to President Lincoln’s attention the need of a Thanksgiving festival to be observed annually on an established day of the year. Lincoln complied with this request by issuing on October 3, 1863, the proclamation naming the last Thursday in November, 1863, as the first annual national Thanksgiving Day.

President Abraham Lincoln's

Issued Oct

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and provoke their aggressions, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict; while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

Proclamation of Thanksgiving

3, 1863

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. I do, therefore, invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that, while offering up the ascriptions justly due to him for singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Abraham Lincoln".

By the President: WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

Thanksgiving and Gettysburg

The national Thanksgiving Day of 1863, set apart by Abraham Lincoln, fell on Thursday, November 26, just one week after the dedication of the Gettysburg Cemetery where Lincoln made his remarkable speech. It might be said that the Gettysburg Address was written in the atmosphere of this Thanksgiving season, as Lincoln's proclamation had already been penned when those few remarks at Gettysburg were prepared.

In his preliminary words of the Proclamation Lincoln wrote, "It has seemed to me fit and proper" to do this, and he said at Gettysburg with reference to the dedication of the battlefield, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we do this."

An Annual Festival

There is nothing in the thanksgiving proclamations of George Washington which suggests the annual aspect of the day; neither was President Madison concerned with more than the one day of thanksgiving during his entire administration. Evidently there was no attempt to set a precedent.

Upon the delivery of Lincoln's proclamation in 1863, however, contemporary editors of various journals were at once conscious that Thanksgiving Day had evolved into a national institution. This editorial appearing in Harper's Weekly confirms this viewpoint:

"It is a fortunate circumstance that our annual thank-offering festival has become a national affair in which the whole people participate upon a common day. . . . We forget that we are states and come to offer tribute to God in our capacity as a nation. The festival thus becomes more significant, not only in its altered character but in its larger suggestions and motives."

It will be observed that in 1864 Lincoln again set aside the last

Thursday in November as a day of thanksgiving, thereby confirming the annual aspect of the day. Upon Lincoln's death President Johnson followed Lincoln's lead, and so has it been with each succeeding President.

The Last Thursday in November

There may be those who wonder if Abraham Lincoln used good judgment in the establishment of a fixed date for the annual Thanksgiving observance, and, if he did, whether he selected an appropriate one.

When Abraham Lincoln set apart the last Thursday in November as the day for the festival, he was contributing to an ancient religious sentiment fostered by the apostolic church. A period of solemnity was always observed with the coming of the Advent season. Fasting and penance had been practiced during the Advent period from time immemorial by the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the English, and the Protestant Episcopal churches.

As early as the sixth century, the first Sunday in Advent was made the New Year's Day of the ecclesiastical calendar, and it always followed the last Thursday in November. The Friday and Saturday preceding Advent Sunday were fast days, so the last Thursday in November became the last day of feasting in the church year. This fact made the day available as a day of thanksgiving festivities.

It is not strange that Washington, an Episcopalian, who was acquainted with the church calendar, chose with discretion this last Thursday in November as a day of thanksgiving and praise which he set apart by proclamation in 1789.

Lincoln was also familiar with the Episcopal calendar, and when he was urged to proclaim a day of national thanksgiving in 1863, a copy of Washington's proclamation of 1789 was made available to him. Lincoln not only issued his proclamation on

October 3, the very same day of the month on which Washington had issued his, but he also set apart for the observance of the national festival the very same day, the last Thursday in November.

The Evolution of Thanksgiving

It would be necessary to go back as early as the beginning of civilization itself to find the first thought contributing to a season of Thanksgiving, but it is not difficult to observe the various stages through which the festival has passed in America from the days of the Pilgrims up to the present.

The encyclopedia, *Americana*, defines Thanksgiving Day as follows: "Thanksgiving Day in the United States, an annual festival of thanksgiving for the mercies of the closing year. The day is fixed by proclamation of the President and the governors of States . . . Since 1863, the Presidents have always issued proclamations appointing the last Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day."

The governors of the various states played a major part in the historic observance of a Thanksgiving Day long before it became a national holiday, and since Lincoln's monumental proclamation in 1863 the governors have likewise cooperated with the President in setting apart the last Thursday in November for its observance.

The names of five people should have prominence in tracing the evolution of Thanksgiving Day in America: Governor Bradford, the founder, representing the colonial era; President Washington, first executive to proclaim a national observance of the day; President Madison, for his revival of the institution; Mrs. Hale for her life-long efforts on behalf of a specific date; and President Lincoln who established by his proclamation of 1863 the First Annual National Thanksgiving Day.

Excerpts From Other Lincoln Proclamations

“It is fit and becoming in all people, at all times, to acknowledge and revere the supreme government of God; to bow in humble submission to his chastisements; to confess and deplore their sins and transgressions, in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” *National Fast Day Proclamation, August 12, 1861.*

“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown; but we have forgotten God.” *National Fast Day Proclamation, March 30, 1863.*

“Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.” *National Fast Day Proclamation, March 30, 1863.*

“It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.” *National Fast Day Proclamation, March 30, 1863.*



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